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SUN TZU TODAY AND TOMORROW

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"War is a matter of vital importance to the state; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied."

"What is the use of such feeble maxims?" asks Clausewitz. It is hard to see at first why Sun Tzu bothered to state this obvious, even instinctual principle. On the surface, it appears to be a statement of the author's intent in compiling the maxims that comprise The Art of War, as well as a literary flourish designed to highlight the work's importance. But it is more than that. To paraphrase in less elegant terms: war in itself is neither bad nor good, cheng nor ch'i, though it assumes each aspect at different times and perspectives. Used properly, it is a desirable tool of statecraft which offers gain. Used haphazardly -- presumably by those who have not "thoroughly studied" it -- it pulls the state to disaster. The critical period in war, according to Sun Tzu, is before the first shot is fired. The critical activity in war is the estimate of opposing forces. Thus the critical decision in warfare is the first one -- whether to give battle.

The principal problem that we as a nation face is in striking this balance, in adapting war to use as a tool of statecraft. Common sense tells us that in an age of nuclear weaponry, war is too destructive an enterprise to enter upon voluntarily. Yet common practice confronts us every year with the need to use force, and perhaps take that first step down the path to nuclear war.

The battle theorists of the past two centuries take us only part of the way in coping with this dilemma. The great wars of our century have been conventional wars of mass and maneuver, and we may soon be in one in the Middle East. So Clausewitz and his successors should not be ignored. But in our current environment of nuclear weapons and literal quantum leaps of technology, the relevance of the battle theorists is declining. Clausewitz may inform the situation in Iraq, but loses in the translation to nuclear war. Conversely,

we have no shortage of perceptive nuclear theorists, but their concepts are too narrow to span the range of military options confronting national leaders. And what of the case of guerrilla war?

To address the challenges, we need a strategist who approaches human conflict not bound by the technological framework of his time. This means either a fully contemporary strategist, able to integrate the conventional and the postconventional. And one hasn't turned up yet on our doorstep. Or we can turn to Sun Tzu. Writing in a pretechnological age, he fills this bill by his concentration on the unchanging human aspects in war.

To test his relevance, measure our current national security practice against the first, fundamental precept of The Art of War, quoted above.

Sun Tzu offers no detailed, rigid prescriptions for when to use force, but instead stresses dispassion and rational calculation of the strategic situation. Americans and their leaders, however, resist this basic precept and refuse to believe that national interest sometimes requires a ruler to choose war as well as peace. Instead, they stack the deck against one of the two options, pride themselves on being "hard to rile," and have to be forced into war. This is understandable: in a democracy, self-sacrifice is unpopular, whether it involves war or taxation. And in a sense, this is good: how much better to incline against war than to be biased in favor. But the best case of all would be to confront each strategic situation with honest reason. Our Presidents follow the popular lead and tend to delay confronting the need for action. When finally convinced of the need for force in international affairs, they scrape hard for a justification and engage in contortions that recall Rose Mary Woods at the dictaphone: consider Grenada and Panama.

Strategically, this is costly. It widens an adversary's range of action, since he knows that America is slow to react and requires an emotional trigger before attacking. Even more seriously, it yields

strategic initiative -- and the key to victory is to attack the enemy's strategy before battle begins. Contrast this with the words of Sun Tzu: "When the strike of a hawk breaks the body of its prey, it is because of timing." (Energy 14, p. 92) It is for this reason that "those skilled in war bring the enemy to the field of battle and are not brought there by him." (Weaknesses and Strengths 2, p. 96). War is a purposeful, rational act of the greatest importance -- survival or ruin ensue -- and the decision to engage or decline battle must be farsighted and rational.

It follows then that the employment of troops must be similarly rational. We pass now from the sphere of the ruler to the sphere of the commander. War has objective principles and laws, which must be "thoroughly studied" for success. There are irrational, emotional elements of war, but Sun Tzu, like Clausewitz, disposes of them by fixing them firmly within a rational framework. War imposes its logic upon the commander, and one who holds otherwise brings disaster upon his troops.

But in recent decades, we've seen a notable extension of civilian authority onto the battlefield, displacing the autonomy of the commander. A fundamental reason for this is technological advance. Rulers in Sun Tzu's day doubtless wished to keep control of the battle, but chose not to sacrifice the comfort and safety of the capital for that privilege. Now, however, satellite communications make it possible for the President to contact unit commanders on a real-time basis, while reconnaissance technology gives damage assessment and targeting information in a similarly short time frame. There is as little guarantee now as in Sun Tzu's day, however, that the civilian leader understands military affairs. America, as the most technologically advanced nation, is particularly susceptible to these dangers.

Even aside from the battlefield, American politicians impose their operational judgment on the military, in force acquisition decisions. Midgetman and the A-10 are but two examples of systems

unwanted by the professional military yet insisted upon by Congress. In peacetime, this is the most common way in which the commander's judgment is overridden. But in wartime, the consequences will be there as indelibly as if Congress were giving orders in combat.

What is the origin of the belief among politicians that they can substitute for generals? It's grounded in a bastardized understanding of Clausewitz, and can be expressed by the flawed syllogism:

- war is a continuation of politics by other means.
- I am skilled in politics.
- therefore I am skilled at war.

Thus the spectacle of Lyndon Johnson in the Situation Room before a map with bombing targets. How telling Sun Tzu's warning of how a ruler brings misfortune upon his army: "when ignorant of command problems, to share in the exercise of responsibilities." (Offensive Strategy 19-22, p. 81) Note that Sun Tzu is not advocating the exclusion of rulers from military affairs -- this is not a narrow, "guild" mentality at work. The operative words are "when ignorant." An informed ruler's participation enhances the Tao of command. It is uninformed participation in war which leads to ruin.

What of nuclear war? Are Sun Tzu's precepts inapplicable here, since it's difficult and distasteful to conceive of a nuclear war which would be fought without constant Presidential input in the conduct of the battle? A nuclear war, however, falls in the purview of national strategy, not operational or tactical art, and as Sun Tzu notes, this level is the domain of the ruler.

Indeed, it's misleading to talk about "conduct of battle" in strategic nuclear war. A future strategic nuclear war will likely be brief and blunt, with comparatively little scope for the talents of the commander. The decision to go to this variant of war carries within it the decision on the way forces will be employed. Said

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another way, the strategic and operational decisions are one and the same in a nuclear war. It is therefore fitting for the ruler to play the major part in this calculation. It is also fitting to emphasize, as Sun Tzu does, that the war is won or lost in the initial calculations.

Indeed, Sun Tzu's writing is far more applicable to the nuclear age than the writings of later strategists. The target of battle is the mind of the enemy commander; the preferred weapon is the threat of force, not the use of force. These principles endure no matter what the advance in technology, and are especially apt in an age where our weapons are arguably too destructive to be used. Sun Tzu defines deterrence in a manner that fits today: "what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy." His emphasis on correct estimates before the battle and the corresponding exhaustive discussion of espionage is remarkably fresh. So too, in a nuclear age, his warnings about the dangers of economic damage to the state.

More than any other strategist, Sun Tzu is timeless. It is nicely paradoxical that Sun Tzu's enduring value in a nuclear age owes to the fact that he wrote in such a technologically primitive one. His emphasis is on those truly central elements unchanging in warfare -- the human, the psychological. The principles he elevates above all others are also timeless: knowledge of self and the adversary, deception in warfare, the duality of cheng and ch'i. Strategists from Clausewitz on are innovative and accurate, but are of declining importance as we accelerate technological change. Their analysis of war is linked to Newtonian technology. Even the language of their analysis -- "friction," "mass" -- betrays the Newtonian underpinning. Yet the shift from a Newtonian age to an Einsteinian era of nuclear weapons left much of traditional doctrine wanting. How much more severe will the next paradigm shift be? Theoretical physicists have been at work for some time delineating the dimensions beyond three. Of what use are such feeble maxims then?

On the rare occasion when Sun Tzu mentions a technological advance, it is to illustrate a human principle: "His potential is that of a fully drawn crossbow; his timing, the release of the trigger." (Energy 16, p. 92) Though the physical assumptions of technology will change, the human "software" which guides the machine is eternal. That is the proper domain of the strategist, and the key to the worth of Sun Tzu.